

SC DNR Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Advisory Committee
February 2, 2016
Congaree Bluffs Heritage Preserve

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Chair Mike Hutchins, Vice Chair Cleve Smith, Titus Duren, Bobby Garmany, Stan Halliday, Bill Hiott, Jonathan Rabon, Stephen Thomas

MEMBER ABSENT:

Martha Herbert

STAFF PRESENT:

Emily Cope, Ken Prosser, Susan Johnson, Ron Ahle, Lynn Quattro, Derrell Shipes, Dean Harrigal, Sam Chappellear, Bob Perry, Billy Dukes, Michael Hook, Michael Small

OTHERS PRESENT:

Mike Hardee, Matt Johnson, representing Horry-Georgetown Sportsman Coalition

Chair Hutchins called the meeting to order and thanked members for their attendance. He reported he hopes to get an update on Committee Member Herbert next week. She is now at home and Chair Hutchins asked members to keep her in their prayers.

The minutes of the November 10, 2015 meeting were approved with the correction of Committee Member Garmany listed as attending.

CONSTITUENT COMMENTS:

Mr. Hardee reminded the Committee that he attended their meeting last February due to concerns regarding the downward spiral of ducks at Samworth WMA. He reported that the Coalition has had discussions with Emily Cope (WFF Deputy Director) and Alvin Taylor (DNR Director). The Coalition's concern is work being done at Samworth has been very slow. Mr. Hardee stated the Coalition has asked for a management plan for Samworth, then asked DNR Biologist Dean Harrigal if he has a management plan. Mr. Harrigal replied he did not recall specifically being asked by his superiors to produce a management plan.

Mrs. Cope stated staff will work on getting a management plan to them. She reported each month once she receives a copy of the staff monthly report which lists activities performed on upper coastal waterfowl projects, she emails the information to Mr. Hardee and Mr. Johnson. Mrs. Cope stated staff has been extremely busy with flood-related issues and even if staff had known about the plan, time constraints would not have allowed it to be written. She will let Mr. Hardee and Mr. Johnson know a time frame when staff can provide an update to the management plan written many years ago. Mrs. Cope announced staff tries to update management plans every 5 years; however, there is a backlog due to the amount of properties across the state.

Mr. Hardee asked what the next step is for work to be done on the area. Mrs. Cope stated now that duck season is over, there are plans for vegetative control work. Mr. Harrigal stated staff did not get to perform a controlled burn last fall due to the amount of water on the property. Staff hopes to conduct a spring burn sometime after the first of March, setting things up for more soil management. Mr. Harrigal stated the first step in management is to burn, the second step will be to evaluate. Staff needs to insure

the infrastructure is back in shape from the flood. Staff is working through the permitting process to get a breach repaired. Mr. Harrigal reiterated staff hopes to get the water off, perform a controlled burn, and evaluate what is appropriate and where for future management.

Mr. Hardee asked if staff had thought more about having a manager for the Samworth area only. Mrs. Cope stated staff is in the process of a personnel action to continue to build staff for the coastal waterfowl project. She feels constituents, the DNR Board and the WFF Advisory Committee will be very pleased about this personnel action once implemented. She hopes to make an announcement within the next couple of weeks.

Mr. Johnson asked if staff conducts a burn, if they will be rototilling some of the land afterwards, particularly some of the land inside the impoundments. Dean Harrigal replied where and when appropriate and if staff can do it. Mr. Johnson stated he had been in business all of his life and he sets goals and once those are reached, you set other goals. Their main concern is they have never heard the goals for Samworth. Mr. Harrigal reported DNR's goal is to produce as good a waterfowl habitat as each property will produce. Mr. Johnson asked if the property will be burned this spring and Mr. Harrigal replied if appropriate. Mr. Johnson stated if they did not ask questions, they would not know the answers, and that he did not mean to offend anyone. He reiterated they care about the property at Samworth, the reason he drove all the way to St. Matthews to attend the meeting.

Mrs. Cope replied that when they have asked questions, staff has been forthcoming as to what activities are being performed and what future plans are (understanding the dynamics of the system).

Mr. Johnson replied that he has a copy of the plan previously mentioned, but a lot of the things in the plan have not been done in many years.

Mrs. Cope stated staff admitted early on there were things that were not being done; and, as a result, significant changes have been made over the past year.

Mr. Johnson stated they have not seen results. He said there were no people inside the dykes at Samworth before the flood. He mentioned there is also a water hyacinth problem. Mrs. Cope replied staff was aware of the water hyacinth at Rabbit Island prior to his call and plans were to address it this spring. Limited staff has been working diligently and keeping everyone in the loop on work that is being done. Staff has been overwhelmed with the amount of work necessary to remedy problems associated with the flood. As she stated all along, this will not be a short-term fix.

Mr. Johnson understands DNR has been having difficulty in finding a heavy equipment operator at Samworth. He asked if the heavy equipment work could be contracted out. Mrs. Cope replied there is so much work to be done, no one wants the job. Staff has been unable to find a private contractor to perform this type of work. Mrs. Cope said if they knew of anyone that would operate a track hoe for DNR for \$15.00 per hour, to please let her know.

Chair Hutchins thanked Mr. Hardee and Mr. Johnson for coming. He stated their last comments to the Committee were taken to heart. As a result, Sam Chappelle has been reporting on work that is being done. Progress was being made prior to the flood. Chair Hutchins announced Coalition members would be happy with the end result. He assured them staff is working very hard.

DOVE SURVEY RESULTS:

Michael Hook, Small Game Project Leader, distributed copies of the recent dove survey and a summary of the results (copies attached to the original minutes). Mr. Hook reported there were 2 versions of the survey, a hand out version (Committee members distributed) and an on-line version. A combined total reflects approximately 860 responses; 763 responses to the on-line version, the remainder from the hand-out version. Mr. Hook stated the on-line version was available for a 45 day period on DNR's website and promoted almost every week on Face Book.

After presenting responses from both versions, a motion was made to accept staff recommendations (which was no change from current dove season regulations): daily bag limit of 15 birds, first segment of season is afternoon shooting only, remaining seasons would be one-half hour before sunrise until sunset.

2016-2017 MIGRATORY BIRD FRAMEWORKS:

Derrell Shipes, Chief, Statewide Projects, Research and Surveys, distributed copies of the 2016-2017 Migratory Bird Frameworks and Staff Recommendations (copies attached to the original minutes). Committee Members received the handouts electronically one day prior to the meeting for review.

Mr. Shipes reported the Fish and Wildlife Service changed their procedure in selecting migratory bird seasons and will no longer utilize a 2 part system (early and late seasons). For the first time, frameworks for both seasons has been set. Going forward, early and late migratory bird seasons will be included in the Rules and Regulations brochure. If everything goes as planned, the 2016-2017 Rule and Regs will include a section for the 2016-2017 migratory bird seasons.

Mr. Shipes reported staff recommendations for dove season as follows: September 3-September 5 (afternoon shooting only); September 6 – October 15; November 12-November 26; December 15 – January 15, 2017 (1/2 hour before sunrise until sunset), representing 90 days of hunting, with a maximum daily bag limit of 15 (to include the definition of the maximum possession limit).

Chair Hutchins called for a motion from the committee regarding staff recommendations for the 2016-2017 dove season.

Committee Member Hiott stated that he is an advocate of the 12 bird maximum daily bag limit, but based on results from the recent dove survey, it appears the general public is in favor of keeping a 15 bird maximum daily bag limit. A discussion followed and a motion was made to accept staff recommendations for the 2016-2017 dove season, a second was received and the motion was unanimously approved.

Mr. Shipes reported the frameworks for duck did not change; i.e., 60 days, with 3 segments. The only change in the maximum daily bag limit is only one (rather than two) canvasback. There is also a change in sea ducks (season reduced from 107 days to 60 days). Also, frameworks include a reduction in the bag limit to 5 (not to include more than 4 eiders, 4 scoters or 4 long-tailed ducks).

Staff recommendations for the 2016-2017 duck season is as follows: November 19-November 26, December 10-January 29, a state youth day on November 12 and 2 federal youth days (February 4 and February 11, 2017). Maximum daily bag limit is 6 total, including no more than 4 each of the following: mallards (no more than 2 hens), eiders, scoters, long-tailed ducks, no more than 3 wood ducks, no more

than 2 pintails, redheads, and scaup, and no more than 1 each of the following: fulvous whistling duck, black-bellied whistling duck, black duck or mottled duck.

A discussion followed and a motion was made to accept staff recommendations for all migratory bird seasons for 2016-2017. A second was received and the motion was unanimously approved.

DRAFT AQUATIC PLANT MANAGEMENT PLAN:

Bob Perry, Director of DNR's Environmental Programs, stated he represents Emily Cope and the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division on the Aquatic Plant Management Council (APMC). Mr. Perry reported the APMC consists of representatives from DNR's Land, Water and Conservation Division, 2 representatives from DHEC, 1 representative from the Department of Agriculture, 1 from the Governor's office and 1 from Clemson University. This group looks at aquatic plant management issues and problems statewide, and makes recommendations on an annual basis on how nuisance species should be handled. Mr. Perry stated while most of their work is completely without controversy, the exception is the Santee Cooper Lakes system (due to its importance to waterfowl and waterfowl habitat). The controversy mainly revolves around the management or control of hydrilla (through the use of grass carp) within the Santee Cooper Lakes.

Mr. Perry reported, unfortunately, the Council has to rely on the science available to them, which is difficult to obtain. Fisheries Biologist Scott Lamprecht has indicated his limited work in that lake system reflects the fish population is in poor condition, due in part to the absence of vegetation. High flows this year have been worse, resulting in multiple spillage events through the operation of the Santee Dam. Staff cannot determine how many grass carp have gone down stream or how much hydrilla is potentially growing. Almost all of the native vegetation is either gone or cannot be surveyed due to high turbidity, resulting in a complex situation.

Mr. Perry stated the APMC has made a recommendation through the Draft Aquatic Plant Management Plan (public noticed on DNR's website on January 19th) to take no action at the present time. The Council plans to work with Santee Cooper to collect data in an attempt to determine fish population in the system. Mr. Perry reported the Council has had a very cordial, working relationship with Santee Cooper over the past several months. If water clarity and normal inflows/outflows allow, plans are to work with Santee Cooper in the spring and early summer to assess the amount of hydrilla and preferred native vegetation that exists.

Comments to the Draft Aquatic Plant Management Plan will end on February 24, 2016. The Council will meet shortly thereafter to consider all comments. At the present time, Mr. Perry does not anticipate a change to the plan from its draft form. Mr. Perry stated he feels certain there will be a working Council meeting this summer to consider all data that has been collected in the Santee Cooper Lake System. A stocking will not occur unless the Council determines it is the appropriate action to take.

Committee Member Thomas made a motion that the WFF Advisory Committee suggest to the Aquatic Plant Management Council that a comment period be open for at least 30 days prior to any additional changes in the Plan. A second to the motion was received and passed unanimously.

UPDATE ON LOWER SALUDA TROUT STUDY:

Ron Ahle, Region 3 Fisheries Biologist, presented an update on a three year study of the fish community with an emphasis on the trout fishery. The study was conducted in response to angler reports of increasing numbers of large trout and improved water quality and quantity. Water quantity improved as

a result of a new flow release program that has been initiated as part of FERC Relicensing Agreement for the Saluda Hydro Project.

Mr. Ahle reported to analyze changes to the Lower Saluda River fish community a four part study was conducted. This study included a tag and recapture element that was completed in two parts, an angler return portion and a boat electrofishing portion. In addition, a roving creel survey and a fish community survey were conducted. The goals of the study were to gain a better understanding of mortality of stocked trout (both natural and angler induced), obtain fish growth data, understand hydro effects on the fish community, and to learn the characteristics of the angling public.

A total of 786 tag returns were received from 289 anglers. Of the total trout reported, 676 were rainbow trout (a 7.5% return rate) and 110 brown trout (a 1.8% return rate). Anglers reported releasing 63% of their catch and harvesting 37%. Harvested trout were captured primarily in the upper portion of the river near public access. The practice of catch and release was prevalent throughout the river. The data showed a large drop off in tag returns by earlier summer suggesting a high mortality rate. The tag returns in the second year dropped to low numbers after a large flow event that took place in early January, with greater than 90% of the total tag returns occurring prior to the big flow event. More evidence of a high mortality rate was presented in a graphic showing the percent of hatchery tags were reported by anglers. Anglers captured and reported only 4.6% of the tagged trout that were stocked over the three year period. Nearly half of these reports were made within two weeks of the stocking date.

Boat electrofishing to capture trout was completed for 3 consecutive years at 9 fixed locations spread across the length of the river at locations with good trout habitat. Catch rates per month were highest in the winter months and lowest in the late summer and fall. Catch rates were also spatially distributed with catch rates highest towards the Lake Murray Dam and lowest towards the confluence.

The three year creel survey was initiated when tagged trout were first stocked into the Lower Saluda River in December, 2012. The Creel was a three year roving study. A total of 373 creels days were completed with 162 days with flows less than 1000 cfs (the approximate maximum flow for safe wading according to TU anglers).

The number of interviews was highest in Reach 1 (48% of the anglers) likely due to the available public access. Anglers interviewed were mostly targeting trout (65%) and striped bass (28%) and no anglers were targeting largemouth bass. Over 50% of the access to the river was by boat with wading and bank fishing being limited by flow releases. Angler expenditures (unexpanded) were about even between those targeting trout and anglers targeting striped bass even though the average striper angler spent twice as much on a per trip basis as did the average trout fisherman. Anglers targeting striped bass spent more money on bait and other miscellaneous expenses.

The final part of the study is the fish community study which involves a survey and inventory of the existing fish community. The purpose of the study is to document the fish community response to the new dissolved oxygen standards and the new flow requirements resulting from the relicensing of the Saluda Hydro Project. The fish community survey was completed using boat electrofishing at 5 locations during the spring, summer and fall. In three years 7046 fish were captured, representing 55 species.

Mr. Ahle stated during the study, it became apparent that the Saluda River was home to a population of trout that have survived in the river more than one year. To gain more information about this population, a tagging program was initiated. A T-bar anchor tag was inserted in captured fish to gain recapture

information. A total of 184 trout in 2.5 years were tagged and tag returns were received from anglers on 49 individual fish. Information suggests that the overall population may be small, but the fish can be caught and released both by angling and electro-fishing.

Mr. Ahle indicated much work is needed to complete this group of studies. Staff plans to finalize field data records and conduct mathematical and statistical analyses. Once all of the data has been analyzed, a final report will be drafted and recommendations for the management of the fishery will be made.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE:

WFF Deputy Director Emily Cope reported staff continues to wait on the House subcommittee to hold a meeting on deer legislation. Staff remains optimistic that the bill will move forward but are unsure of what changes will be made. Legislation is going to be introduced regarding striped bass changes on the Santee Cooper Lakes (resulting from the stakeholder committee). Mrs. Cope stated there is grass carp legislation moving forward (a technical fix for clarification to an item in the Chapter 13 rewrite). There are currently three deer/dog bills staff is monitoring. One stakeholder meeting has been held and another will be held in the next few weeks to develop a consensus/agreement on what is necessary to address challenges associated with deer hunting with dogs.

OLD/NEW BUSINESS:

Chair Hutchins reported DNR's app has been off line for approximately 6 months and is up and working as of February 1. To access the app, go to "southcarolinadnr", and click on "official."

Committee Member Thomas asked if the Advisory Committee will meet prior to the Rules and Regulations deadline, (his interest being Carr Creek). Mrs. Cope stated Carr Creek will be a topic at the Committee's next meeting. She is not sure what the deadline is for the R&R.

There were no Advisory Committee comments.

DATE, TIME AND PLACE OF NEXT MEETING:

Tuesday, May 3, 2016, 10:00 AM, DNR Board Room, Columbia, SC (confirmed 2/3/16)

Chair Hutchins asked Vice Chair Smith to chair the May meeting since he will not be able to attend.